

VIDEO

FAQ

Q Why would I want a Media Center Extender?

A Media Center Extenders, like the DMA2200 (right), work similarly to other networked media players. They let you stream music, videos and photos from your PC to another room in your home. However, Extenders use an interface that is almost identical to Windows Media Center's. This means that you not only benefit from its clear menus and ease of use, but you can also stream live TV from your PC.

You will need a PC running Vista Home Premium or Ultimate with at least one TV tuner (preferably two for simultaneous viewing and recording). If you have such a PC, the Extender will let you watch recorded programmes, browse the EPG, schedule recordings and even pause the live TV stream.

Seth Barton

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LINKSYS DMA2200

★★★★★

£205 inc VAT

From www.rankhour.com

The first generation of Windows Media Center Extenders were released in the US in 2004, but the DMA2200 is the first dedicated extender we've seen in the UK. The only other Extender currently available is Microsoft's Xbox 360, but that doesn't come with wireless networking as standard and is rather noisy when in use.

Unlike the distinctive Xbox 360, the DMA2200 is small and unobtrusive. There's also an even smaller DMA2100, which is functionally identical but lacks the DMA2200's DVD player. It's about the size of a wireless router and costs £185 inc VAT from www.dabs.com.

On the rear of the DMA2200 is every video and audio output you're likely to need. The HDMI port supports HDCP for protected content, and outputs HD resolutions up to and including 1080p. The DVD drive only plays audio CDs and DVDs, which are upscaled to HD resolutions over HDMI. The component output supports HD resolutions, too, though won't upscale DVDs. A SCART output means you can connect to older CRT televisions. For audio there are optical and coaxial S/PDIFs as well as a stereo phono output.

This is the first media streaming device we've seen to support Draft-N networking.

Theoretically, this means you can stream high-definition video wirelessly from your PC to the DMA2200. Draft-N worked well in our tests, with 720p WMV HD files playing smoothly, though the layout of your home and the positioning of your router will be crucial. The DMA2200 also supports dual-band Draft-N, which should enable faster, more reliable connection speeds with a compatible router.

We particularly like the built-in network tuner, which helps you get

SUMMARY

- ✓ Streams live TV
- ✓ Draft-N wireless
- ✗ Needs a Vista Media Center PC

STREAMING MEDIA PLAYER 2.4GHz PC, 1GB RAM, works with Windows Vista Home Premium or Ultimate; HDMI, component, SCART, S-video, composite, optical and coaxial S/PDIFs, phono stereo outputs, 100Mbit/s Ethernet and 802.11a/b/g/n interfaces
PART CODE DMA2200
DETAILS www.linksys.com



the best wireless performance. This shows a real-time graph displaying your network connection speed, with target marks for standard and high-definition playback. It's certainly handy when tweaking the position of the Extender, your router or their aerials.

The Extender is easy to set up. The connection is secured by a password, shown onscreen, which you enter on your PC. The range of compatible file formats (MPEG1, MPEG2, WMV9 and H.264) isn't extensive but should be enough for most people. We managed to stream XviD files to the device, but H.264 files refused to play. Linksys informed us that only H.264 files in the MP4 format with AAC audio are officially supported, but we still couldn't get any such files to be recognised.

The remote control is well designed; the interface looks almost identical to Media Center on a Vista PC, with effects such as transparencies present for when you access the EPG while watching live TV. It responds

to inputs rapidly, and you get all the usual Media Center luxuries such as photo slideshows, video and photo thumbnails and album cover art.

It's a well-designed device and a better choice than the Xbox 360 for those who don't want to play games. However, a Media Center Extender's advantage is its ability to stream TV. If you simply want to stream media files, D-Link's DSM-510 (see *What's New, Shopper* 242) plays a wider range of file types and is cheaper.

Seth Barton

Also consider...

TERRATEC Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity

★★★★★

£58 inc VAT

From www.pixmania.co.uk



This USB TV tuner has a diversity mode that takes a signal from two tuners and aerials to improve reception in areas with weak signal strength. Alternatively, you can use the tuners independently to receive one programme while recording another.

The included software is easy to use, image quality is good, and the remote is clearly labelled.

The XS Diversity is the best dual tuner we've seen.

USB TV TUNER USB2 interface, dual digital tuners, 2x RF inputs
PART CODE 10456 DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net> FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



CANON HV20

★★★★★

£560 inc VAT

From www.bestcameras.co.uk



The HV20 is our favourite high-definition camcorder. It's affordable, but it doesn't sacrifice video quality and supports features such as progressive scan. You'll get excellent footage in almost any situation.

It's easy for beginners to use and has enough manual controls to capture the best images in trickier conditions. Footage is stored to old-fashioned MiniDV tapes, but don't let that put you off.



HD CAMCORDER MiniDV storage, 10x optical zoom, 1/2.1in 2.96-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, HDMI, component, composite and phono outputs, USB2 and FireWire interfaces
PART CODE 2060B006AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Oct 2007

Battery life: 95%
-50% Reference +50% +100%

PANASONIC HDC-HS9

★★★★★

£768 inc VAT
From www.dabs.com

Many of Panasonic's HD camcorders have only an SDHC memory card slot for storage, but the HDC-HS9 adds a hard disk into the mix. Its 60GB capacity will store around eight hours of HD video even at the highest quality setting of 17Mbit/s. Add a 16GB SDHC card for under £50 inc VAT and you've got over 10 hours of storage. This should be enough for holidays or weddings, and the memory card can be used for copying and transferring data.

You'll need a big battery to take advantage of all that storage, and the HDC-HS9 allows this thanks to an external cavity for the battery on the rear. The supplied 1,320mAh battery provides a continuous recording time of one hour and 42 minutes, but you can fit batteries up to 5,800mAh, which protrude from the back.

Fitting a large battery isn't a big issue as there's no viewfinder to obstruct. Instead, there's a 2.7in LCD screen that displays an impressive level of detail, thanks to its 300,000 pixels. Enthusiasts may bemoan the lack of a viewfinder, but it's not hard to see that the HDC-HS9 is aimed at novices. There's no input for a microphone, for example, so you're stuck using audio from the built-in 5.1 surround-sound microphone. The lack of an accessory shoe means you can't add a video light directly to the camcorder.

Instead Panasonic has focused on ease-of-use features for casual users. Face detection, now widely available on stills cameras, makes its camcorder debut here. Faces are tracked by



the camcorder, while focus and exposure are adjusted to suit them. It works well, although the rest of the shot often suffers from over- or under-exposure because of it. Thankfully a dedicated button is provided to disable this feature.

Panasonic continues to use three smaller CCD sensors to generate HD video, rather than a single large CMOS sensor as used by both Sony and Canon. Despite this, the HDC-HS9 can produce 1,920x1,080 video, in either interlaced or progressive modes. In bright conditions the three CCDs provide a crisp image with great colour accuracy. However, their small 1/6in size means they suffer in dim light from a lack of colour and plenty of picture noise. Canon's HG10 (*What's New, Shopper* 240) produces good video quality in a wider variety of conditions, though the two camcorders are about equal in well-lit surroundings.

The HDC-HS9 is compact, stylish and well-designed, and ideal for those who just want to point and shoot. Camcorders tend to be expensive just after they're released, though, and this is no exception. Canon's HG10, despite its smaller hard disk and miniSD-only card slot, is currently a better deal at £580 including VAT from www.empiredirect.co.uk.

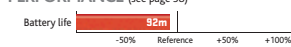
Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Big hard disk
- ✓ Compact design
- ✗ Expensive

HD CAMCORDER 60GB hard disk and SDHC storage, 10x optical zoom, 3x 1/6in 0.56-megapixel CCDs, 2.7in LCD screen, mini HDMI, component, composite and phono output, USB2 interface
PART CODE HDC-HS9EB-S
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



CHOOSING A... TV Card

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

INTERFACE: USB or PCI
TUNER: Digital or hybrid
INPUTS: Radio frequency (RF)
CAPTURE FORMAT: MPEG2
HARDWARE COMPRESSION: No
Recommended minimum in grey

1 TV cards connect to PCs through a variety of interfaces. Internal cards fit into PCI or PCI-E x1 slots. External devices with USB interfaces are easier to install, but use up a USB port. USB stick and PC Card versions are also available and are ideal for notebooks.

2 Most devices only tune to digital TV broadcasts, but hybrid tuners can receive analogue broadcasts as well. Terrestrial digital TV, or Freeview as it's commonly known, provides extra free channels, but you can't access subscription channels with a TV tuner card.

Analogue broadcasts can give a superior picture to digital broadcasts, but digital tuners don't suffer from noise and ghosting when reception is poor. You can check the digital reception in your area at www.freeview.co.uk. Remember that analogue broadcasts are being phased out, so analogue-only tuners are a poor choice.

3 Basic devices provide an RF input for connecting an aerial. To connect an analogue video device, such as a camcorder or VCR for video capture, look for a composite or, preferably, S-video input. Digital tuners tend not to include this feature. Buy a hybrid device if you want to receive digital TV and capture analogue video.

4 If you want to use your PC for video editing or as a digital video recorder, you'll need to capture video in an appropriate compression format. The most practical format is MPEG2, which gives excellent quality and reasonable file sizes.

Digital TV is broadcast in MPEG2 format, which makes recording to disk easy. Expect an hour of MPEG2 video to take up roughly 1.5GB of hard disk space.

5 Most TV tuners come with their own software for watching TV and scheduling recordings. Many tuners are also compatible with the excellent Windows Media Center, which is included with the Home Premium and Ultimate versions of Windows Vista.

TOP UP TV TUTV Anytime DTR

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT
From www.topup.tv

BEST BUY This hard disk Freeview recorder has twin tuners, so you can watch one programme while recording another. It also has a 160GB hard disk, which is enough to store over 100 hours of recordings.

As well as the usual Freeview broadcasts, you can opt to receive additional Top Up TV programming downloaded to the hard disk for £10 a month. This is an inexpensive way for you to make the most of your TV viewing.



HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, RF output, 2x SCART, S-video, composite, stereo phono and coaxial S/PDIF output PART CODE DT1 6300-16
DETAILS www.topuptv.com FULL REVIEW Jul 2007

CANON MD101

★★★★★

£134 inc VAT
From www.ukdigitalcameras.co.uk

BEST BUY The MD101 is a great camcorder, at an extremely low price. It has a widescreen LCD, which means that what you see on the screen is what you get on your TV.

Picture quality is excellent in good lighting conditions, with realistic colours and very little noise. Only the lack of a USB port is disappointing.



DV CAMERA MiniDV storage, 30x optical zoom, 1/6in 0.8-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, phono and composite output, FireWire interface
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
PART CODE 1881B007AA
FULL REVIEW Aug 2007

